Physical Activity and the Health of Young People

Fact Sheet

Benefits of Regular Physical Activity

- Helps build and maintain healthy bones and muscles.[1]
- Helps control weight, build lean muscle, and reduce fat.[1]
- Reduces feelings of depression and anxiety and promotes psychological well-being.[1]

Long-Term Consequences of Physical Inactivity

- Physical inactivity and poor diet together account for at least 300,000 deaths in the United States each year. Only tobacco use contributes to more preventable deaths.[2]
- Physical inactivity increases the risk of dying prematurely, dying of heart disease, and developing diabetes, colon cancer, and high blood pressure.[1]

Overweight and Obesity

- The percentage of children and adolescents who are overweight has more than doubled in the past 30 years; most of this increase has occurred since the late 1970s.[3,4]
- Of young people aged 6–17 years, about 5.3 million, or 12.5%, are seriously overweight.[4,5]
- Obese children and adolescents are more likely to become obese adults;[6,7] overweight adults are at increased risk for heart disease, high blood pressure, stroke, diabetes, some types of cancer, and gallbladder disease.[8]

Participation in Physical Activity by Young People

- Nearly half of young people aged 12–21 years do not regularly engage in vigorous physical activity.[9]
- Participation in physical activity declines strikingly as children get older.
  - Regular participation in vigorous physical activity has been reported by 69% of young people aged 12–13 years but only 38% of those aged 18–21.[9]
  - Seventy-three percent of 9th graders but only 58% of 12th graders regularly participate in vigorous physical activity.[10]
  - Among all high school students, regular participation in vigorous physical activity dropped from 66% in 1991 to 64% in 1997.[11]

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Percentage of High School Students Participating in Different Types of Physical Activity, by Sex, 1997[10]

Type of Activity	Girls	Boys
Regular vigorous physical activity[a]	54%	72%
Almost daily light to moderate activity[b]	20%	21%
Regular strengthening/toning activities[c]	43%	58%
Regular stretching activities[d]	50%	52%

[a]Participation in activities that made them sweat and breathe hard for at least 20 minutes on at least 3 of the 7 preceding days.
[b]Walking or bicycling for 30 minutes or more on at least 5 of the 7 preceding days.
[c]Participation in activities such as push-ups, sit-ups, or weightlifting during at least 3 of the 7 preceding days.
[d]Participation in activities such as toe touching, knee bending, and leg stretching on at least 3 of the 7 preceding days.

Participation in Physical Education Class and Sports Teams

- Only 49% of U.S. high school students (69% of 9th graders but only 36% of 12th graders) were enrolled in a physical education class in 1997.[10]
- The percentage of students who attended a daily physical education class dropped from 42% in 1991 to 27% in 1997;[11] in 1997, 43% of 9th graders but only 19% of 12th graders attended a daily physical education class.[10]
- In 1997, only 22% of all high school students reported being physically active for at least 20 minutes in a daily physical education class.[12]
- Of students enrolled in physical education classes in 1997, 27% reported that they did not exercise for 20 or more minutes in an average physical education class.[10]
- Among high school students, 51% of girls and 68% of boys played on a school- or community-based sports team in 1997.[12]

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